

# PLAY, CHURCH LADIES AND THE STRUGGLE FOR REPRODUCTIVE AUTONOMY: AN INTERVIEW WITH BENJAMIN SHEPARD

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# Play, Church Ladies and the Struggle for Reproductive Autonomy:

## An Interview with Benjamin Shepard

Guillaume MARCHE

### **mots-clés/key-words**

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*Entretien réalisé le 25 octobre 2011  
avec Benjamin Shepard, sociologue  
et militant LGBT pour le droit à  
l'avortement à New York.*

**BENJAMIN SHEPARD**, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Human Services at City Tech, the college of technology of the City University of New York. Much of his scholarship is born of participant observation and qualitative research on social services and social movements. He has worked on campaigns around public space, including community gardens, bike lanes, and public welfare. To this end, he has done organizing work with the Professional Staff Congress, ACT UP!, Occupy Wall Street, SexPanic!, Reclaim the Streets, Times UP, CitiWide Harm Reduction, Housing Works, More Gardens!, and the Church Ladies for Choice. He is currently, the advocacy coordinator for the National Organization of Human Services. He is the author of: *White Nights and Ascending Shadows: An Oral History of the San Francisco AIDS Epidemic* (Cassell, 1997), *Queer Political Performance and Protest* (Routledge, 2009), *Play, Creativity and Social*

*Movements: If I Can't Dance It's Not My Revolution* (Routledge, 2011), and *The Beach Beneath the Streets: Contesting New York's Public Spaces* (SUNY Press), co-written with Greg Smithsimon. He is the co-editor of *From ACT UP to the WTO: Urban Protest and Community Building in the Era of Globalization* (Verso, 2002). The latter work was a non-fiction finalist for the Lambda Literary Awards in 2002. His main themes of academic and activist interest include the intersection between gender, sex, and play in the politics of public space. In this interview on October 25, 2011, he talks about the Church Ladies for Choice, a group made up of gay men and lesbians who dress in drag and sing parodies of church hymns in front of abortion clinics to counter the hostile demonstrations of "pro-life" activists such as Operation Rescue or the Helpers of God's Precious Infants.

**GUILLAUME MARCHE:** *How did the Church Ladies for Choice first appear?*

**BENJAMIN SHEPARD:** Basically in the late eighties in New York, several people in ACT UP were at a protest at a time when the Supreme Court was increasingly moving to the right, and the New Right was leading an assault on AIDS prevention, reproductive rights, and the self-determination of women, of people with HIV and AIDS. ACT UP member Yasha Bunchik was at a demonstration with fellow ACT UPper Brian Griffin. They were at a protest and they started humming along songs, and one of the chants was "how many more have to die?" And after chanting it repeatedly, it became "Harmonie Moore has to die?" and Griffin said "Who is that poor woman Harmonie Moore? Why does she have to die?" He actually took that as his drag name, Harmonie Moore (as "in how many more women must die in illegal botched abortions?") and they literally started singing on the spot.<sup>1</sup> They realized that singing was a much more fun way of being at a clinic blockade than just standing around and chanting, so the group started writing songs. This was a period right after the "stop the Church" action when ACT UP zapped St Patrick's Cathedral.<sup>2</sup> Literally the Church Ladies grew out of that: they became part of the front-line of defense against Operation Rescue during the "summer of mercy" in 1991 when Randall Terry was really on the offensive, and the right wing was using direct action. So the Church Ladies grew out of this idea of using direct action to support spaces like abortion clinics. People have come and gone, it's been a small affinity group within ACT UP New York—fifteen to twenty people, sometimes down to ten, sometimes up to twenty-five. But it's basically a group of gay men, lesbians, queers wearing drag, and it's more of a practice than a group, because the Church Ladies exist only to the extent that we're engaging in clinic defense. Each of the Church

Ladies' performances highlights the implicit links between women's health, reproductive autonomy, choice, and HIV prevention. Yet, they do it with a politics which links the lessons of queer activism and feminism translated through jokes and songs. I've been at it since 1999. We also participate in yearly events including the Dyke March the Drag March as well as doing fundraising for various organizations—like the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence—particularly for AIDS service and homeless youth organizations. And it's been a lot of fun.

*G.M. — What would be the similarities and differences between the Church Ladies and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence?*<sup>3</sup>

**B.S.** — There is a similarity between the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence and the Church Ladies spiritually and philosophically. The silliness of men wearing nun outfits or in drag fighting for self-determination, queer-friendliness, and anti-misogyny in both groups. There's a sense that religion has gone out of control and it's worth ridiculing. I don't think people are anti-religion, but there's a sense that formal religion has been used to create a lot of hurtfulness, and a lot of pain. And so they ridicule it. The Church Ladies are here to hurl some pies. That is part of the power of disarming the powerful with humor, that's something both groups share. We might even go back to the Cockettes<sup>4</sup> and the genderfuck groups in San Francisco who had the view that the performance is the rehearsal and the rehearsal is the performance, so we should enjoy ourselves as much as we can in the middle. The other thing I love about the Cockettes is the idea of the do-it-yourself approach, the idea that you don't need any formal training; anybody can participate. So the two groups just have two different cultural environments: queer activism in San Francisco is different than in New York—Jose Sarría, a drag entertainer, ran for office and got nearly 10,000 votes in 1961: I don't think there's an equivalent for that in New York. What drives both groups is a campy, biting, pro-sex attitude and disposition.

*G.M. — What would be the similarities and differences between the Church Ladies and the Radical Faeries?*<sup>5</sup>

**B.S.** — The Radical Faeries came out of Harry Hay's idea that the gay movement was becoming too commercialized, too much about bars and joining institutional politics in the United States.<sup>6</sup> The Church Ladies appreciate that affinity but have spent plenty of their time in bars, drinking cocktails in tacky gay bars, so that's not entirely part of our critique. But we do the Drag March with the Radical Faeries in New York every year. And we share an appreciation for gender insubordination. They also celebrate the absurd defiance to formal political processes just as we do. The Radical Faeries on the West Coast engage in much more public nudity than the East-Coast chapters do. There's more of a

sense of freedom in public space on the West Coast, although this last year we've had naked bike rides and people have been able to celebrate being in public a lot more. That's also part of the vitality of the Occupy Wall Street movement: the publicness of people standing in alliance with their bodies. Judith Butler came to Zucotti Park the other day and talked about this alliance, building a democracy by sharing our bodies.<sup>7</sup> The queer movement is in a moment when we're supporting broader-based movements for social justice wherever we possibly can. I think that's the beauty of what's happening now with Occupy Wall Street, which both movements support. Although I don't think queer theory is doing that: it seems to me that the street is always two steps ahead of theory and queer theory doesn't seem to be echoing what's going on on the streets right now. I think the anarchist theory is doing a better job of reflecting an activist praxis than queer theory.

**G.M.** — *Aren't the Radical Faeries more of a spiritual movement, and don't they have themselves as their audience more than the public?*

**B.S.** — Yes, in the gatherings in particular, and it's really freeing for people to be able to share space at the gatherings where people get to determine what gender they will present. Harry Hay and Arthur Evans had a sense that there was something spiritually distinct about being queer. And they proposed an alternative practice to the homogenization of queer lives seen with a gay agenda pushing gay marriage, the right to join the military, and to have advertisements at gay pride parade for Coors beer—which used to be boycotted at gay pride parades, but now it's another corporate sponsor. And in the Castro in San Francisco, there have been gay groups actually working to push homeless youths off the streets. The same thing has happened in New York with the West-Side piers where homeless youths have been coming for a generation. So if this is all formal gay politics is about, a gentrification of the mind, they don't want to have anything to do with it.<sup>8</sup> And when the Faeries organize something here like in Tompkins Square Park before the Drag March, everyone is invited to participate, it's much more inclusive than most gay organizing—if you can call Human Rights Campaign organizers.<sup>9</sup> So despite the differences in the types of actions and the audience, there is a similarity in the liberating practice. And these movements overlap a lot: a lot of people participate in multiple movements.

**G.M.** — *When did you first join the Church Ladies?*

**B.S.** — I joined the Church Ladies for Choice in the street in 1998, and the first action that I participated in as a Church Lady was in 1999. The reason why I joined is that these were my friends, people that I'd gotten arrested with at the Matthew Shepard political funeral in 1998, when the New York police

department told 5,000 people they had to stand on the sidewalk! Of course you aren't going to stand on the sidewalk so several people stepped in the street and the police arrested all the marshals.<sup>10</sup> So we became friends, a lot of these activists became friends, this is a movement that was driven by friendship—like the affinity groups from the Spanish Civil War: the idea that you have these small groups of friends who eat together, build meals together as well as do politics together. Now I think that's why I've always loved the Church Ladies for Choice: it's because we perform in front of clinics where the "antis"—the people who want to deny women the right to decide what they want to do with their own bodies, usually men—demonstrate. And in these moments, when you are confronted with these very hateful people—people who really don't respect women, who're out to yell at women not to kill their child etc.—the Church Ladies' power is to deflect that hate. We create a fun-house mirror effect with some of that absurdity and point it back at the media or those who are full of hate, showing them how ridiculous they look. Because it's absurd, the power of the Church Ladies is to offer an absurd response to an absurd situation.

For example one of my favorite Church Ladies songs is "Chop It Off," "chop it off chop it off with a kitchen knife" goes the chorus. It's a song based on the Jingle Bells Christmas song, but it's about a woman who castrated her husband because he was abusing her.<sup>11</sup> Sure we're not here to celebrate castration, but the argument is to be a bit absurd and to say that people have the right to fight back. People have the right to have autonomy over their bodies, and movements have to have humor, movements have to have music. We owe a lot to the Civil Rights movement: music drove that movement; music helped the activists when they were dealing with any number of physical, psychological, emotional threats. Particularly the Freedom Riders when they were taking the buses down to Mississippi, when they were being threatened at gun-point with physical violence, songs were what got people through those moments. If they were arrested in a jail and the toilet water got turned off, they would sing songs. So songs are a resilience, they're a coping mechanism. And part of the reason why the Church Ladies have been working for so long, twenty years now, is that we sing together and we really enjoy singing together, protesting. So it's a friendship as much as anything else, and that's part of the vitality of the Church Ladies over the years.

But it's also resistance. Every year on the Friday night before the Pride march we always have a Drag March because during the "Stonewall 25" celebration in 1994, some of the more conservative elements in the movement wanted to have the movement distance itself from drag and gender insubordination.<sup>12</sup> And this year in 2011 the police were trying to push us off the streets during our informal Drag March. So a group of us, using music and

sound and dancing, basically reclaimed the street. The police were trying to take one person's bike, so a group of us pulled the police out and talked to the police and said: "look, you don't want to have a riot on your hands the week end of celebrating Stonewall, you don't want to have a riot on your hands the night that New York is going to celebrate gay pride and is going to vote on marriage equality.<sup>13</sup> So we were out dancing and celebrating, the police backed off, we turned up the sound machine on the sound bike—which is a bike equipped with an amplified system—and we danced until a late hour of the evening. So there was a party, and at the same time the next morning we had clinic defense.

So many of us showed up with a few hours' sleep up to the ambulatory clinic in Brooklyn where we defended the clinic with music and sound. Because you don't want to have the "antis" show up at an abortion clinic and have no opposition. So you've got this festive celebration of life and resistance, and this idea that we're allowed to be different, we're allowed to be queer—whereas the gay movement is so much about getting married and joining the military and having hate-crime laws: it's like the Holy Trinity of assimilationist politics. But there's another kind of politics that says being queer is about sexual self-determination, it's about the autonomy of the body, it's about the body as a battle-ground, as in the old feminist slogan: well, we really believe that. So it's a cultural movement as well as a form of resistance, and the music I think is the reason why it's still going.

**G.M.** — *You mentioned absurdity and being absurd. How do you respond to somebody who tells you: "wouldn't it be a more effective form of mobilization to make sense, to make an argument, rather than just be absurd and ridicule your opponents?"*

**B.S.** — All good organizing is supported by initiating a proposal, research that supports your claim, mobilization, direct action, a legal argument, a long-term and a short-term set of goals, as well as a little fun. So sure, there's a rational argument to be made, and in the United States and New York there are Supreme Court rulings as well as state and city laws that say that people are not allowed to harass and intimidate women in front of an abortion clinic. But that doesn't mean that the police in New York enforce those laws. So when you're faced with an absurd situation, sometimes an absurd response is an effective way of undermining the power of those who are opposing you. There's this long tradition of the wise fool, who's been able to get the attention of the king through humor, and that's part of what we are doing: there's a meaning in the absurdity, in the silliness, there's a way to communicate with people in ways that are disarming.<sup>14</sup> So there's a place for rational discourse, but I don't want to fetishize rational discourse; there's more to life than that.



The Church Ladies' political choices are supported: if you want to look at evidence and data, there's plenty of policy that establishes that women have a right to have access to abortion clinic, yet it doesn't keep people from trying to block women, trying to get their telephone numbers and telling them not to kill their babies. We just had to pass a law in New York state that says you're not allowed to form one of these alternative-to-abortion programs where they will take women's telephone numbers, and harass women, and text them all day long telling them "don't kill your babies"—and these are not doctors, but they act like doctors.<sup>15</sup> So there's a battlefield going on out there. Sometime the absurdity is part of getting power, that's part of what movements are about: it's not just about evidence and data, it's about getting power and organizing around power.

**G.M.** — *What is the reception of the Church Ladies in the more institutionalized pro-choice movement?*

**B.S.** — We've worked closely in partnership with groups like Brooklyn Pro-Choice Network for many years,<sup>16</sup> so we have complete support and members of our group have been involved in the more institutionalized parts of the movement as well. Sometimes they're the ones who call and say "can you guys get out and show up in drag? Please, we need some support." And sometimes it's just a matter of saying "let's just do it." But the organizations like the National Organization for Women, those are no longer the groups that mobilize anymore. You need to have people on the streets. I think any effective movement has an inside / outside strategy: it has people at the negotiating tables and it has people on the streets. That's part of what the Church Ladies are doing: we're at the frontline of the reproductive rights movement. And I think there's power in linking reproductive rights with HIV prevention and sexual self-determination: that's the whole point—it's a broad movement. The Church Ladies started working with another women's pro-choice direct action group in New York in the early nineties, and it only makes the movement stronger to have people on the inside and the outside working at the same time.

**G.M.** — *Is the use of humor, of singing, and of less formal or "serious" forms of action another way of being politically radical?*

**B.S.** — There are people who want to demobilize movements. The environmental movement in the US used to be a social movement on the streets, and over the years it's become more a matter of hiring lobbyists and lawyers and *they* will do the work. The same goes with the women's movement: is it a social movement, or is it a set of institutions and organizations? Social movements need people on the streets, and the street is a stage, a stage for performing, performing in a tragic-comic continuum of



experience. Any good movement will have a whole range of emotions to express. Is it radical? I don't know, but I think it mobilizes. I'm very interested in the notion of praxis, of movement theory and action intersecting. I think there is an activist praxis here.

*G.M. — What about this DIY, not institutionally elaborate side of collective action—this focusing on simple things that you can do with as little technical or institutional equipment as possible? Is that a more efficient way of getting people to participate?*

**B.S.** — Institutionalized politics is boring. I think a good social movement has to engage people in their hearts and minds, to create changes of opinion in hearts and minds. Institutionalized channels often involve long meetings, financial contributions to political parties or other organizations, and that demobilizes regular people and creates hierarchies of participation, of expectation. When you look at social movements, the people that create change are the people willing to engage in direct action, and direct action does not happen through institutions. There are organizations doing direct action that get funding, like Housing Works in New York,<sup>17</sup> but I'm much more in tune with the Church Ladies which have sort of a consensus-based anarchist model. There's no formal leadership: there might be informal leaders, but no formal leadership that establishes an agenda. It's much more of a group that collectively makes decisions. I'm not interested in working with a group where there's a top-down leadership.

For work, I sit on boards and there's a leader of the board, but that's work. And part of what is liberating about what the Church Ladies do—or Reclaim The Streets,<sup>18</sup> or Time's Up<sup>19</sup> and the various affinity groups that I'm involved in—is that we use *play* as part of our resistance, we engage in an oppositional politics that creates a sense of liberty and play, it has a freeing quality. This is opposed to work, this isn't drudgery. Situationists talked about the fact that when politics becomes drudgery it stops being effective. It is important to recognize that we have plenty of drudgery at work: I've just finished grading twenty papers, I love my students, I love teaching, but there's plenty of work involved, and in the time when I'm not working on my committees for my job, in my volunteer time, I want to make sure that the politics I'm involved in is all about personal freedom and collective democratic community. That type of mobilization is more engaging, much more meaningful for me. And I think it draws people in, it makes politics much more enticing. It brings in an element of desire, an element of eros—social eros, which creates something very powerful. Part of the vitality of the ACT UP movement out of which the Church Ladies were born, is this idea of love between minds, of love between bodies that brings people in, that makes people feel part of something bigger

and larger. It makes people express their desire for something better in this world. I don't think you get that in institutional politics.<sup>20</sup>

**G.M.** — *So you are not just saying that the medium is the message and you can't dissociate the means from the ends: you are talking about the idea of prefigurativeness.*<sup>21</sup>

**B.S.** — Absolutely. It's really important that we build something better in our politics than what we do in everyday life. I mean I can't go to one of those actions where we walk in circles with signs and chanting and screaming. For example, at one of the actions around austerity in New York, instead of marching in circles with signs, my union had a jazz band playing, and there was dancing, and we still made the same point about austerity in the state budget and about funding for state universities. But we didn't have to do it in a boring way. The groups that I work with—the Church Ladies, Time's Up, another group that I'm involved in that is about building community gardens, building self-determination for communities, building support for homeless queer youth—all this is bottom-up: it has a do-it-yourself approach, it is not involved in asking for permission. If you ask for permission over and over again, you're going to spend our life waiting for the phone to ring. They're not going to give you permission; you're just going to have to just do it! Frederick Douglass said "Power concedes nothing without a demand." If you don't make a demand with your politics—even cultural demands—you're not going to get what you need. And as my friend Eric Rofes said, if people don't get their needs met, they're going to leave.

So what we're looking at is: how do people get nourishment in a movement? How do people feel that they're sustaining themselves for the long-haul? And that's important; that's where the play, and the pleasure, and the culture fit in as well: it's a question of long-term sustainability. The Church Ladies have been doing this for twenty years, and we're still supporting ACT UP, we're still supporting the fight for national health care. Last night I went with one of the Church Ladies to a rally for homeless youth, and this woman, Kate Barnhart, built an agency called New Alternatives<sup>22</sup> with a bunch of Church Ladies out of the sweat from their own brow, without getting funding from the city. She is getting funding through events such as silent auctions with the "Imperial Court" where people perform in drag and pass a hat around to fund organizations.<sup>23</sup> So the do-it-yourself approach is where we create our own counter-power.

**G.M.** — *How do you respond to somebody who tells you that the whole enjoyment-based and pleasure-oriented form of organization is too inward-directed, a bit like preaching to the choir? And on the contrary, how do you respond to somebody who tells you that standing in front of an abortion clinic*

*in drag, singing silly and absurd songs that still make a point, can be intimidating to potential participants, people who would participate in less absurd forms of collective action, but will be put off by this form of action?*

**B.S.** — They're more than welcome to come on a Saturday morning at eight o'clock on Pride week-end if they want to come! And Brooklyn Pro-Choice Network has a lot of volunteers and we've never heard someone raise that concern. Cultural movements have to be culturally specific. You have to be respectful and work in dialogue with the communities you're working with; we work in partnership with the Brooklyn Pro-choice Network, we're not trying to be in opposition with them. If I'm going to a rally against police brutality, I'm not going to bring an absurd outfit and go in drag. What a good organizer has to do is respect local culture and indigenous leadership, and work in partnership with communities.

**G.M.** — *So it's not either/or, it's both/and.*

**B.S.** — Yes, I think it's complementary. Does it create change? Infrapolitical means of action at the personal level create power. For every woman who has to go to an abortion clinic, it's going to be one of the worst days in her life, and if we can draw some of the hate and resentment away from the "antis" who are bringing pictures of dead fetuses and are saying "hey, why are you killing your baby today?"—if we can bring some of that hate away from that woman who has to go to the clinic, who is making her own choice, her own legal choice, which is still protected in this city and state, well, I'm proud to be doing that. There's also a whole tradition of play being part of social movements that have created change. It's one of the tools in the tool-chest; it is not the only tool. I'm not here to fetishize one tool at the expense of another; I'm not here to fetishize one tactic at the expense of other tactics. If we're talking about a larger strategy for a campaign to create change, play can be one part of it. It's been part of the labor movement, of the environmental movement, of the Civil Rights movement, of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power movement, which saved so many people's lives, part of the garden movement that tries to preserve community gardens in New York City, in the face of gentrification. It's been part of these movements, but these movements are also dynamic movements that have multiple ingredients, multiple tools in the tool-chest. Every campaign is different; campaigns in different moments require different approaches. I am certainly happy to go to City Council here and testify and read and wear a suit if that's justified. But sometimes, like in poker, you don't bet against the house. If you play by their rules you're not going to win: they'll win. So it's not in our interest to always play by power's rules. Formal political processes

that were earnest didn't always get the goods either: direct action gets the goods, because they're going to pay more attention to somebody that disrupts the hearing. If you play by the rules you don't always tend to win.

*G.M. — So would you say that infrapolitical means of action allow a strong form of empowerment?*

**B.S.** — Empowerment is one way to put it; another way is to say that friendship is an important part of this movement. When Harry Hay moved from San Francisco to Los Angeles in the 1940s, he did not know a single person, but he had the telephone numbers of two friends of friends'. He called them, and they started meeting, and the meetings became the Mattachine Society, which started the homophile movement and helped create the gay liberation and gay rights movements. That's what I see as so vital about queer organizing: friendship. It's when you get a call from a friend that says "come out," and you show up and participate in a rally. People will show up and enjoy themselves, they show up out of pleasure: you can *cruise* at a demonstration—I remember going to the AIDS Quilt and being cruised there!<sup>24</sup> I think people go to demonstrations because they know they will be seeing friends, they know they might pick up somebody; so there's a sense of pleasure, and eros, and friendship that drives people, that creates a fabric. And if you have enough people who create friendships, that can get people out, you can create change with that. Peter Nardi wrote a book on gay male friendships,<sup>25</sup> and he writes about people receiving phone calls from friends on a phone-tree asking them to come out to an AIDS demonstration in the mid-1980s: it was friendship that kept this kind of thing going. When I look at the Radical Faeries or the Church Ladies today, I see that when you get along you can get things done. So these friendships create the fabric for the movement to build itself and create counter-power: because we're accountable to each other.

*G.M. — What you find so rewarding in the Church Ladies, is it the resistance, or is it the creativity?*

**B.S.** — I don't differentiate between the two. The Church Ladies are a creative force: a force about love, a force about self-determination, a force about the freedom of bodies and autonomy. And every time that I perform with the Church Ladies I'm energized, and I love the songs, I love the lyrics, I love the culture of performing at events. I think good resistance builds on elements of creativity. There's a generative quality in building—again in anarchist terms—dual power: a counter-power, "the shell of the new within the shell of the old." You can build something really powerful in terms of resistance if you bring art, and music, and sound, and visuals, and dancing as well as ideas into a resistance movement. So I think the two support each other.

**G.M.** — *How would you define social-movement praxis?*

**B.S.** — Praxis is where theory and practice intersect as an engaged theoretically informed model of practice. There is often a criticism about movements lacking theoretical grounding. But I'll tell you, you can't swing a cat at a demonstration today and not hit a sociologist! There are a lot of people who are both engaged in thinking about theory, and also participating in movements. That leads you to a theory born out of practice. Saul Alinsky talks about this: for a movement to be effective you have to reflect on the actions, and if you don't it's going to become "a pile of undigested action." But the reflection, the writing, the blogging, the elaborating in essays, the Internet web-pages, the follow-up meetings: that becomes a set of ideas, and there's a practical wisdom born of the experience of these movements and what worked and what didn't work. And I think what is going on with the movement to reclaim public space is a new kind of activist praxis. There is a lovely quality of trial and error which drives it. I think it's very exciting to see that many of our assumptions are totally disproved by what's happening on the streets. Some of us went to Zucotti Park in 1999, and the minute we approached Wall Street we were arrested. But this year a new generation of activists said "no, we're going to reclaim this space, we're going to occupy Wall Street. We're going to go sleep in the park; we'll have an ongoing occupation." That's something nobody would have thought about if we'd sat on our theory.

So I am not a fan of rational choice theory: people don't make political decisions out of rational choice. We don't just think about allocating resources; certainly rational choice is a way of looking at it, but it's a limiting way of looking at human beings. We aren't rational: we smoke, we jump off bridges with rubber-bands, we enjoy eating fatty cheese—why? Because it's good, that's why we do it! This is part of life. So as analysts of social movements we should consider criteria that are part of human behavior and movement practices themselves. That's why I like the work of Polletta a lot,<sup>26</sup> because stories are why everybody is a blogger nowadays, that's why everyone is so excited about Occupy Wall Street: before, images of income inequality were represented in pie-charts. Everybody knows about economic and social inequality, particularly here in the States. But it didn't become something to mobilize around until there was a *story*. And when we look at this long-term resistance with people camping out on the street, I think a very important aspect of that is people engaging in mutual aid. Some of it is an external messaging, with the card-board signs saying "we are part of the 99 percent," but there's also mutual aid, which is about people sharing ideas, sharing music, sharing food. And that is a form of resistance, because it's breaking down the isolation that so many people expect. The business as usual depends a lot on social isolation. The politics that I'm interested in engaging in, that I participate in, is

a prefigurative politics, a politics that aspires to build something better in the here-and-now; and that happens through social relations.

**G.M.** — *So when you talk about the “ethos of pleasure” in social movement,<sup>27</sup> what you mean is that pleasure is not just a pleasant addition to a social movement, but it is part and parcel of the fabric of the social movement.*

**B.S.** — Yes, there’s an embodied element in social movements, which runs counter to the Protestant work ethic in this country. Resentment of the body has been an important part of US politics, it creates a politics based on guilt, and guilt is not a good generator of human behavior. I think desire and care are stronger motivating forces. People will make better political decisions if they take care of themselves, if they have a sense of desire for something better. Sexual desire is one thing, but when I’m talking about social eros, I’m also talking about a desire among minds, where the social body becomes larger. That’s why the Church Ladies insist that reproductive rights have to be part of HIV prevention and sexual self-determination: it can’t be one or the other. Self-determination can be talked about until it’s practiced; otherwise its meaning is obscured.

**G.M.** — *So would you say that the Church Ladies are infrapolitical, or rather that they’re “super-political”?*

**B.S.** — There is an infrapolitical quality to the action because it does go below the radar but at the same time we use multiple tactics. We use whichever weapons we can find to resist mechanisms of oppression. One of the Church Ladies is a teacher, and we were talking about how the City of New York passed an ordinance saying that for bake-sales, you’re not allowed to bring cookies from home, because the City can’t count the calories! So mothers can’t bring home-made cookies and cakes to school, they have to bring Doritos and bagged crap. And this teacher was telling me about how much he smiled when he saw all the moms show up in an illegal, civil-disobedience bake-off where they brought all their baked goods anyway, and sold them anyway in defiance of the Bloomberg administration and the Board of Education. So resistance takes many different forms, both below and above the radar.

**G.M.** — *How does your experience as an academic relate to your experience as a social-movement participant?*

**B.S.** — At City University, where I teach, there is a long tradition of engaged academics—like Frances Fox Piven at the Graduate Center or Richard Perez of the Young Lords who taught at Brooklyn College.<sup>28</sup> My school is a great support for activists and likes engaged scholarship, it supports students

going out there and being part of civic life. And scholar-activists bring that to the table, they help students feel that this isn't just theory, there's something else that's going on, and you can take part in that. Of course there are other institutions that wouldn't want that. Engaged scholarship helps inform questions which one brings to activism, research, writing, teaching, and back into the streets. Here questions born from the street or meetings are answered in multiple ways and in multiple fashions. When one brings those questions into the classroom, it makes teaching feel all that much more dynamic and vital.

**G.M.** — *How would you account for the relative lack of academic attention to the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence or the Church Ladies for Choice?*

**B.S.** — Jan Cohen-Cruz wrote a wonderful essay on the Church Ladies, so they've been recognized.<sup>29</sup> But certainly my sense is that queer theory now doesn't have a lot of interest in social movements. Fifteen years ago there was a lot more of one. A few academic superstars are becoming fetishized, but there's certainly an opportunity here to write an ethnography of the Church Ladies for Choice.

## NOTES

1. Benjamin Shepard, "Bridging the Divide between Queer Theory and Anarchism," *Sexualities* 13:4 (2010): 511-527. For more on the early history of the Church Ladies, see B. Shepard, *Queer Politics and Political Performance: Play, Pleasure and Social Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

2. Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolson, *AIDS Demo Graphics* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990).

3. Founded in 1979 the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are constituted as a religious order, made primarily of gay men. They resort to humor in order to promote LGBT rights, fight against AIDS and intolerance (<http://thesisters.org>).

4. Shepard, "Bridging the Divide," *op. cit.* 516-520.

5. Founded by Harry Hay, the Radical Faeries are a group of gay men who share a belief in the spiritual specificity of homosexuality and gender nonconformity, and organize pagan celebrations of sexuality (<http://www.radicalfaeries.net>).

6. Harry Hay, *Radically Gay: Gay Liberation in the Words of Its Founder* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

7. Judith Butler at Occupy Wall Street, 23 October 2011, <http://www.youtube.com> (viewed 7 November 2011).

8. For a review of such thinking see the work of queer activist group Gay Shame (<http://www.gayshamesf.org>) as well as Sarah Schulman, *Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2012).

9. Human Rights Campaign is the leading assimilationist LGBT rights organizations in the United States (<http://www.hrc.org>).



## NOTES

10. Michael Cooper, "96 Arrested During Rally Protesting Gay Man's Killing in Wyoming," *The New York Times*, October 20, 1998, <http://www.nytimes.com> (viewed November 7, 2011).
11. Shepard, "Bridging the Divide," *op. cit.* 520-521.
12. Benjamin Shepard, "Dancing in the Streets: Contested Public Spaces and the History of Queer Life," *Dissent*, June 24, 2011, <http://dissentmagazine.org> (viewed November 7, 2011).
13. Nicholas Confessore and Michael Barbaro, "New York Allows Same-Sex Marriage, Becoming Largest State to Pass Law," *The New York Times*, June 24, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com> (viewed November 7, 2011). For a review of the 2011 drag march, see Benjamin Shepard, "From Drag to Eternity: Street Protest and Gay Marriage in a Neoconservative City," 2011, <http://benjaminheimshepard.blogspot.com/2011/07/from-drag-to-eternity-street-protest.html>.
14. Benjamin Shepard, "Queer Politics and Anti-Capitalism: From Theory to Praxis," ed. Scherer Burkhard, *Queering Paradigms* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2010) 81-99.
15. Annie Newman, "New York Passes Law to Rein in Crisis Pregnancy Centers," March 16, 2011, <http://www.rhrealitycheck.org/blog/2011/03/02/york-city-reins-crisis-pregnancy-centers>.
16. Brooklyn Pro-Choice Network is a network of activists who escort women to abortion clinics and organize pro-choice counter-demonstrations to oppose "pro-life" events ([www.brooklynprochoicenetwork.org](http://www.brooklynprochoicenetwork.org)).
17. Housing Works provides advocacy and services—in particular housing—for people with HIV/AIDS (<http://www.housingworks.org>).
18. Reclaim The Streets is an international movement that protests the commercialization of public space by corporations, mainly by occupying the streets with parties.
19. Time's Up is a New York-based direct-action group that promotes the idea of a more environmentally sustainable city (<http://times-up.org>).
20. For a review of play and social movement activity, see B. Shepard, *Queer Politics and Political Performance*, and *Play, Creativity and Social Movements: If I Can't Dance it's Not My Revolution* (New York: Routledge, 2011).
21. Alberto Melucci, "The Symbolic Challenge of Contemporary Movements," *Social Research* 52:4 (1985): 789-817.
22. New Alternatives for LGBT Homeless Youth is a New York-based nonprofit organization that provides shelter, food, and educational opportunities for homeless LGBT youth (<http://www.newalternativesnyc.org>).
23. The Imperial Court of New York supports GLBT communities citywide <http://www.icny.org/icny>.
24. Founded in 1987, the AIDS Memorial Quilt is an assemblage of quilt panels in memory of the people who died of AIDS: it is meant as a tribute to the dead, and as an effort to alert the public about the epidemic and about prevention (<http://www.aidsquilt.org>).
25. Peter Nardi, *Gay Men's Friendships: Invincible Communities* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999).
26. Francesca Polletta, *It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006).
27. Shepard, "Bridging the Divide," *op. cit.*
28. Corey Kilgannon, "Richard Perez Is Dead at 59: Advocate for Minority Rights," *The New York Times*, March 29, 2004, <http://nytimes.com> (viewed 7 November 2011).
29. Jan Cohen-Cruz, "At Cross Purposes. The Church Ladies for Choice," ed. Jan Cohen-Cruz *Radical Street Performance. An International Anthology* (New York: Routledge, 1998) 90-99.